

## NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN TEACHING READING COMPREHENSION SKILLS TO EFL LEARNERS

**Marzook Maazi Alshammari**

Madinah College of Tourism & Hospitality - Saudi Arabia

**ABSTRACT:** *The past few years have seen much discussion about the teaching of reading comprehension to EFL learners. What has traditionally occurred in the average EFL classroom appears to be more like the testing, rather than the teaching, of reading comprehension. This paper discusses how far EFL teaching of reading comprehension has kept up with the research, and specifically, whether EFL teaching has remained in touch with some of the more recent views that have led to the development of new methods of teaching reading skills. The paper examines how EFL course-books published during the past two decades address the teaching of reading comprehension at intermediate levels and beyond. In particular, it considers the selection of texts, the types of activities used, and the reflection of current views on the teaching of reading comprehension.*

**KEYWORDS:** EFL, reading skills, teaching reading comprehension, course-books

### INTRODUCTION

The general aim of teaching reading in a foreign language is to enable learners to identify the meaning of written texts and to be more autonomous in their personal reading (Abu-Ghararah, 1998; McCrea, 2003). It is appropriate, therefore, to consider the definition of reading given by the Michigan Department of Education<sup>1</sup> as significant. It states that “reading is the process of constructing meaning through the dynamic interaction among the reader’s existing knowledge, the information suggested by the written language, and the context of the reading situation.”

Many researchers would agree that the process of reading a text consists of three basic elements:

- a) The reader him/herself, and his/her ability to understand the main idea of the text
- b) The type and structure of the text to be read
- c) The interaction between the reader and the text (Anderson et al.,<sup>2</sup> 1985; Aebersold & Field, 2004; Goodman, 1998)

So far, however, there has been a considerable theoretical debate over the issue of teaching reading comprehension, which, in many cases, appears more similar to testing reading comprehension than teaching it. This paper attempts to discuss this issue in the light of more recent views that have led to the development of new methods of teaching reading, and to different methods of choosing the types of texts required and other activities used in recent EFL course-books.

### Purposes of reading

The purpose of reading differs from individual to individual and from one situation to another. In other words, the different circumstances people face in their daily lives determine the

<sup>1</sup> [www.michiganreading.org](http://www.michiganreading.org)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.eduplace.com/rdg/res/teach/def.html>

purpose of their reading, which can vary from reading for information to reading for excitement.

This view is supported by Davies (1995) who lists five purposes for reading:

- a) Reading for pleasure
- b) Reading for a general impression
- c) Reading to organize a text and for study purposes
- d) Reading to learn content or procedures
- e) Reading for language learning

### **Different types of reading**

Given that there are a variety of reading purposes, there are also different types of reading that can be adopted in accordance with these purposes. In this respect, researchers have mentioned a number of different types of reading, for example:

**1. Scanning.** This refers to the process of going quickly through a text to find particular information, such as specific phrases, figures, names, and so on (Urquhart & Weir, 1998).

**2. Skimming.** This equates to a quick reading through of a text to establish the gist or to form an overall impression about the topic (Urquhart & Weir, 1998).

**3. Intensive reading (reading for detail).** In this case, the reader may read shorter texts to extract definite information or may try to recognize and analyze the organization and content of the texts being read (Abu-Ghararah, 1998; Urquhart & Weir, 1998; Grellet, 1986).

**4. Extensive reading.** This deals with reading an entire text, usually for enjoyment, such as short stories, novels, or plays. It is a fluency reading, which usually ends with constructing a general understanding (Grellet, 1986).

### **Models of reading**

There are three main models in which reading can occur (Aebersold & Field, 2004):

**1. Bottom-up theory.** According to this theory, the reader tries to decode every letter he or she encounters in the written words by matching it to its aural equivalent to arrive at the meaning of the words (Aebersold & Field, 2004; McDonough & Shaw, 2003; Nunan, 1999).

**2. Top-down theory.** This theory states that readers bring meaning to the text based on their prior experience and interpret the text based on their previous knowledge.<sup>3</sup> In other words, it emphasizes that the reader appropriates the text to his/her previous knowledge and then checks only the unknown words that may appear (Aebersold & Field, 2004).

**3. The interactive school.** This focuses on the interaction between both the bottom-up and top-down processes (McDonough & Shaw, 2003). However, it has been argued that the interaction between what is written in the text and what the reader brings to it<sup>4</sup> leads to the construction of a thorough understanding (McDonough & Shaw, 2003).

### **What is meant by reading comprehension?**

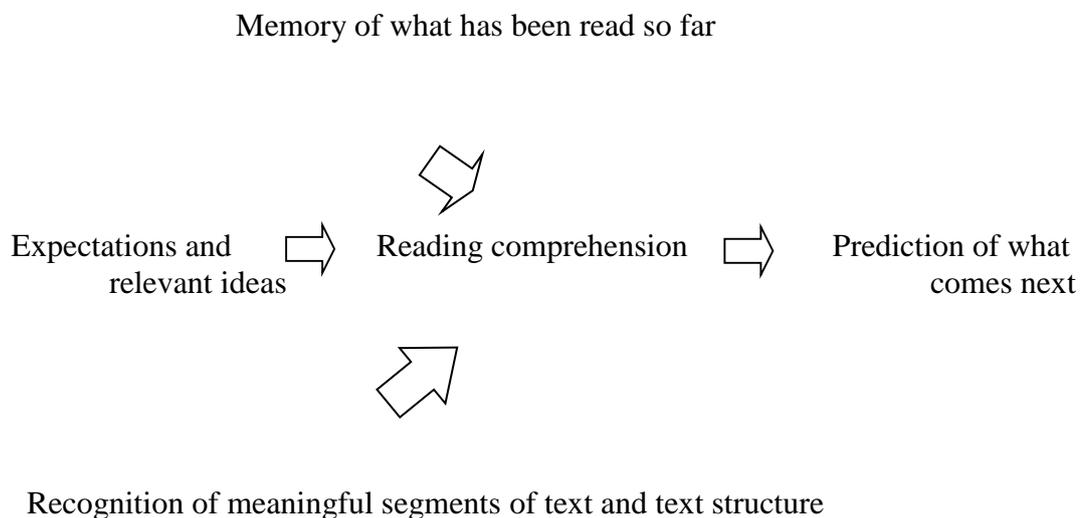
<sup>3</sup> <http://nadabs11.tripod.com/reading/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://nadabs11.tripod.com/reading/>

Reading comprehension can be defined as the ability to extract the required information from a written text and interpret this information properly (Grape & Stoller, 2002:17; Grellet, 1981). In other words, reading comprehension refers to how people understand and interpret what they read in an appropriate way.

However, Davies and Pearse (2002:90) argue that the process of building an accurate interpretation of the text begins with some expectations based on the type of text to be read (e.g., a newspaper), followed by identifying the topic and structure of the text. This process will activate the reader's background information about the topic and lead to an interaction between the reader's linguistic knowledge and the text, and resultantly this helps the reader predict what may happen (See Figure 1).

Furthermore, Grellet (1981:3–4) states that three factors contribute to constructing comprehension: the type of text to be read, the purpose of reading, and the method of reading and the techniques the reader uses.



**Figure 1. A Model of Reading Comprehension (Adapted from Davies & Pearse, 2002)**

### **Research on reading in a second language**

To date, various studies have been conducted in the field of reading in a second language. Nunan (1999) mentions some of the recent studies that have gained most attention. These studies are briefly summarized below:

**1. Schema theory.** This theory states that readers' previous knowledge, experience, and expectations about the world influences their ability to understand new information (Nunan, 1999:257). Therefore, this study emphasizes that the content of the topic read should be familiar to students<sup>5</sup> to help them understand what they are reading.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.csus.edu/indiv/g/gipej/teaparty.pdf>

**2. The transfer hypothesis.** This research argues that good readers in the first language may face difficulty in transferring their knowledge and proficiency to the second language. The study has shown that L1 reading skills are not transferable to a second language due to the limited linguistic proficiency “short circuit” in the second language. However, this study also suggests that lower proficiency students can be given pre-reading tasks to help them apply what they already know about the topic in their reading (Nunan, 1999:258).

**3. The cross-cultural aspects of reading comprehension.** This study concentrated on the effect of cultural background knowledge on reading comprehension, and found that readers from different cultural backgrounds interpret the same text in different ways (Nunan, 1999:259). In this respect, Lin (2004) states that “without sufficient background knowledge of social culture, the readers cannot comprehend the deep meaning of texts.” Therefore, this study shows that the process of comprehending a language depends mainly on understanding the relevant cultural background knowledge rather than comprehension of grammatical structures and vocabulary (Wang Lin<sup>6</sup>, 2004).

### **Differences between teaching and testing reading comprehension**

One of the most significant current discussions in the field of teaching reading is that, in many reading classes, teachers spend the majority of their time testing reading comprehension rather than teaching students how to comprehend (Anderson, 1999; Nuttall, 1982). In a traditional reading lesson, it was common to find students being given some passages to read without preparation or even previous discussion. Students were then asked to answer some comprehension questions on the topic and carry out a number of exercises focusing on, for example, some grammatical items or the vocabulary to be developed in the unit. In another situation, a teacher may read the text aloud while students follow on the page, before the students are sometimes then asked to read the text aloud. Finally, the group would discuss a number of questions raised by the text to find the right answers (Urquhart & Weir, 1998:171; McDonough & Shaw, 2003:91).

It is no exaggeration, therefore, to suggest that teaching reading in this way could lead students to focus on how to find the right answer rather than on understanding what they are reading; consequently, teaching reading may appear to be closer to testing than teaching. Associated with this assertion, Bannatyne<sup>7</sup> (2012) claims that the use of traditional comprehension questions in reading lessons is “less than successful” for the following reasons:

- a) “Questioning students” is assumed to be testing rather than teaching comprehension
- b) “Rote memory” generally focuses on what students remember about the content and this encourages memorization, which cannot be assumed to be true of comprehension
- c) Teachers seldom teach students how to deduce, infer, induce, and be insightful, which is where true comprehension can be gained

Nevertheless, it has been increasingly difficult to ignore the influence of traditional reading texts in this issue. McDonough and Shaw (2003: 91–92) argue that the traditional way of organizing reading materials is “inadequate” because it does not provide learners with helpful texts, nor give them the opportunity to improve their reading skills.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://asian-efl-journal.com/journal-2004/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.bannatynereadingprogram.com/BP10COMP.htm>

On the other hand, Anderson (1999:38) states that “in order to teach for comprehension...readers must monitor their comprehension processes and be able to discuss with the teacher and/or fellow readers what strategies are being implemented to comprehend.” Moreover, Grellet (1986:9) distinguishes between testing and teaching by claiming “...testing will obviously involve more accuracy-type exercises whereas through teaching one should try to develop the skills...the students must be taught how to approach and consider the text in order to become independent and efficient readers.”

It is possible to say, therefore, that if teaching comprehension is to be more successful, close attention should be paid to teaching learners how to comprehend by passing on the reading comprehension skills and strategies that will best help students improve their understanding. Several recently developed models of reading comprehension processes include a number of activities to be carried out during classes. In other words, the exercises in current course books are designed in such a way that the reading skills and strategies can be taught in class (Urquhart & Weir, 1998; Anderson, 1999). Therefore, the argument is that while the testing of reading comprehension focuses mainly on measuring students’ understanding of specific points in the passage, teaching reading comprehension involves instructing students in how to comprehend by improving their reading skills and strategies.

### **Reading comprehension in the classroom**

As previously mentioned, recently designed course-books include a number of activities that focus mainly on the development of reading skills (McDonough & Shaw, 2003; Urquhart & Weir, 1998). Indeed, according to Urquhart & Weir (1998), the exercises in current textbooks go beyond answering the comprehension questions to teaching the reading strategies within the text at the pre-reading, while-reading, and after-reading stages. A typical reading lesson, therefore, incorporates the following stages:

**1. Pre-reading.** At this stage the teacher may start by activating students’ background knowledge and experiences (Bradford & Day, 1998) of the topic to attract their interest in the subject of the text. The teacher may then introduce the new vocabulary or patterns that appear in the passage (Abu-Ghararah, 1998). They can explain the meanings of new words in a number of ways, for example by using context, synonyms, or antonyms. Moreover, the teacher may raise some comprehension questions about the topic, where students can find the answers in the passage (Abu-Ghararah, 1998).

**2. While reading:** The students start reading the passage silently at their own pace (Bradford & Day, 1998) while the teacher ensures they are reading continuously without returning to previous words (Abu-Ghararah, 1998). While reading, students should be encouraged to find the answers to the comprehension questions given earlier (Bradford & Day, 1998; Abu-Ghararah, 1998). Additionally, they may use various reading strategies, such as scanning and skimming, to find specific information or to gain a general impression of the text (Davies & Pearce, 2002).

**3. Post-reading:** After silent reading, students may split into small groups to discuss their answers to the questions and their views of the topic (Bradford & Day, 1998). The teacher may then ask students to carry out a number of exercises intended to assess their general

understanding and their ability to employ the reading skills and strategies, such as guessing and/or deducing the meaning of unknown words (Bradford & Day, 1998).

### **Recent developments in reading activities**

As a reaction to the traditional comprehension and multiple-choice exercises, Davies and Green (1984) and Davies (1995) developed the Directed Activities Related to Text (DART) model of tasks (Nunan, 1999). Davies (1995:144) claims that the traditional comprehension and multiple-choice exercises, which may be used as the main measurement tool for comprehension, are “seen to have very limited potential as learning activities.” As an alternative, Davies (1995) suggests the “active reading task,” the most significant features of which are:

- a) The types of texts to be used are typically “authentic and challenging”
- b) Texts should give students a rhetorical or relevant framework so that they are able to analyze them easily
- c) Regularly, the tasks require an oral reading by the teacher or a student followed by silent reading of the text
- d) Tasks should give students an opportunity to interact with the text and with each other
- e) Engagement of students should be achieved through direct analysis of the text rather than by answering indirect questions

Furthermore, Davies (1995:144) claims that, by considering these features, the active reading tasks may change the way students interact with the given text as follows:

- a) Students’ hypotheses about texts will be more explicit
- b) Students will share their ideas and evaluate each other’s hypotheses by referring to the text
- c) There will be discussions about different interpretations
- d) Students will have the opportunity to ask about what they do not know, rather than having to answer questions that may appear inappropriate or that they already know the answers to
- e) Students learn how to give a critique of the reading text

### **Strategies for reading comprehension**

There are a variety of comprehensive strategies that could be considered when teaching reading to second/foreign language learners, including:

- a) Giving a purpose for reading
  - b) Previewing the text
  - c) Predicting
  - d) Skimming
  - e) Scanning
  - f) Clustering
  - g) Guessing
  - h) Analyzing unknown words
  - i) Differentiating between literal and implied meanings
- (Brown, 2001:292; Grape & Stoller, 2002:16; Nunan, 1999:265)

### Reading texts and activities in current EFL course-books

In this section, three EFL course-books published in past ten years will be examined in terms of the selection of texts and the type of activities used. These are:

- a) *New English File* (Oxenden & Koenig, 2008): Upper intermediate
- b) *Cutting Edge* (Cunningham & Moor, 2007): Upper intermediate
- c) *Life Lines* (Hutchinson, 1997): Intermediate

In addition, the upper intermediate course-book *Streetwise* (Nolasco, 1993) will be examined to determine to what extent the current EFL course-books have developed in terms of the types of activities used.

### Reading texts

Reviewing these course-books reveals that the reading texts used have the following features:

1. The selected texts are authentic and well-written, with some of them taken from other authentic sources, for instance specific books, journal articles, abstracts, and so on.
2. The content of the selected texts deals generally with relevant topics at the students' levels of experience and with their background knowledge. In other words, they discuss things that most students are familiar with, such as social life, environmental problems, global issues, and so on.
3. They contain some grammatical structures and function words that can be discussed during the unit.
4. The texts are supported by some related pictures that are intended to attract students' attention and, in some cases, give clues about the content of the text.

### Types of activities

It is clear that the recent course-books include three types of activities that can be completed at the pre-reading, while-reading, and after-reading stages. Tables 1 and 2 compare the types of activities used in traditional and recent course-books.

**Table 1. Types of Activities Found in Recent EFL Course-books**

Course-book	Types of activities		
	Pre-reading activities	While-reading activities	After-reading activities
New English File (2008)	a) identifying new words b) group discussion/conversation about the topic c) brainstorming d) questions on the topic	a) scanning b) answering questions c) guessing the meaning of unknown words c) asking each other questions	a) group discussion b) language-focused tasks.
Cutting Edge (2007)	a) preparation: discussion to activate students' knowledge (brainstorming) b) identifying new words	a) scanning/skimmming b) group discussion/ answering questions	a) group discussion about the main ideas/reactions/findings/feelings b) summarizing the text c) carrying out tasks on language

	c) questions to be answered from the text		structure
Life Lines (1997)	a) brainstorming/prediction/discussion about the topic b) identifying new vocabulary by guessing/synonyms/dictionary c) questions to be answered from the text	a) scanning/skimming b) answering questions c) table completion d) rereading (to find specific information)	a) group discussion (opinions/feelings) b) generating questions c) language-focused tasks (e.g., grammatical structures)

Table 2. Traditional EFL Course-book

Course-book	Types of activities		
	Pre-reading activities	While-reading activities	After-reading activities
Streetwise (1993)	a) warming up activity -engaging students' interest in/experiences of the topic b) group discussion/expectations/opinions	None	a) answering comprehension questions b) identifying new vocabulary in the text (through context/synonyms/group discussion) c) language structure tasks

From Table 1 we can see that the current course-books contain a number of reading activities intended to improve students' skills and strategies and increase their comprehension. In contrast, Table 2 shows that the traditional course-books did not include while-reading activities, instead focusing mainly on answering comprehension questions and identifying new words after reading the text.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has explained why the traditional teaching of reading comprehension appears to equate more with testing than teaching, which is attributable to the nature of the reading texts and the activities used in traditional course-books. Furthermore, the paper has shown that recent developments in reading methodology and reading materials have influenced recent course-

books. It can be argued that skills and strategies are the two main aspects of reading that can be taught to enhance readers' autonomy (McCrea, 2003).

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